

HE LIVES AGAIN

BY

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THE MEETING

Sahan looked out the window with a feeling of shame and disgust. A disgust about the world and its people. The shame he was feeling was directed towards himself. This was the third unsuccessful suicide attempt, or that's what he thought it was. He tried to cut himself in the first attempt, slit his wrists to be precise.

The second time, he tried taking pills, and ended up in the hospital for nearly a month. This time, he tried to choke himself to death with the aid of his old blanket, but before the sheet was even tied around his neck, he gave up.

"Well, I'm fucked. I'm fed up, and I don't know what to do," as these words came to his mind, feelings of emptiness and sadness overtook him.

He was in his early twenties, with a good family and loving parents. But he seemed lost. He seemed lost with what to do, he seemed lost with how to look at people and the world, and he constantly got irritated by how people treated him like he didn't exist.

"People live their lives blindly and they pretend that they are happy even when they are not. Every day is a constant struggle for them, a new challenge, and the problems people face do not make life worth living."

Those words were constantly on his mind. This feeling of emptiness laden with disappointment wasn't new to him. He considered himself special because he was able to see the suffering of individuals, even when they tried to mask it. This bothered him. Not in a searching-for-the-meaning-of life way, but in more of a depressing way.

The reason for his third suicide attempt was a comment made by a friend to him on his way of living.

"You're a fool, you know, with all the things you have, and yet you choose to dwell in your sad little bubble."

As his friend was muttering those words, all he felt was the friend's disappointment in him, and the subtle message of how ungrateful he was.

"I can't help it, you know. When you look at the world and the things people do, I don't feel like there's beauty in life. I don't feel like living at all." He recalled his conversation with his friend.

His musings were disturbed by his mother's voice. His mother was asking him to come over to have dinner and at that moment he realized something. He realized how loving his mother was, and how precious he was to her. This realization made him promise himself not to take any drastic action like ending his life, at least for the sake of his mother.

When looking at Sahan, one can't help but wonder why this boy might even think of killing himself. He was a handsome young guy, studying at a good university, and his parents were supporting him emotionally and financially. His good grades were a good indicator of how he

managed to live up to his parents' expectations. He didn't have any enemies, as he was a pleasant and charming fellow, at least on the outside.

"Are you going to the library tomorrow?" Sahan's mother asked since he had a habit of going to the library every Monday.

"Yes, I guess," he gave a short answer.

"Who knows, maybe these library visits will help you get yourself a girlfriend," his mother said humorously.

As she was ending her sentence, Sahan stood up and walked away. For him, any mention about a girl, or getting a girlfriend, added unnecessary pressure. He hated himself for it, quite honestly. He wasn't sure whether he hated himself for not being able to get a girlfriend, or for not getting the urge to have one, even though almost every guy he knew had a girlfriend of some sort.

The next day, as he entered the library, he saw a guy wandering around the entrance. He seemed lost like he didn't know where to go. Sahan looked at the guy and decided he wanted to help. He wanted to help the stranger to get into the library, and to show him where to go. But when the stranger looked at Sahan, he looked down. Sahan was scared of eye contact.

"Excuse me, can you please tell me where the study area is?" the stranger asked, politely.

"Sure, it's onto your right. You can follow me. I'm going there too." Sahan answered the stranger. He was around the same age as Sahan, maybe a bit older. He wore simple clothes, and they looked old and rugged as if they had been worn several times.

"Yeah, sure, thank you," the stranger replied happily with a bright smile.

"I'm Anthony by the way," he introduced himself.

"Oh, I'm Sahan," Sahan replied as they were heading towards the study area.

After some time into studying, Anthony disturbed the dreadful silence in the study area suddenly.

“Will this be worth it?” he asked.

“What-,” Sahan asked, puzzled. Also, he got a little angry that Anthony had disturbed his concentration.

“The things you study, will they be worth it?” Anthony asked, lowering his voice while pointing towards Sahan’s books.

“I think so, I mean, that’s the whole point right?” Sahan replied rather angrily. Angry that this stranger was making noise in the study area.

Deep down, Sahan knew that he was angry at the stranger not because he was making noise in the study area, but because of how the others studying in the library might look at Sahan, because of Anthony’s actions. He thought that, because of Anthony, the others there would despise him.

“I don’t think so, most of us don’t have our priorities straight,” Anthony said.

“Do you want to study that? Do you really want to be a chemist because you’re studying chemistry?” he continued to disturb Sahan.

“I don’t know,” Sahan replied, curtly. All he wanted to ask Anthony was to shut his mouth, but he could not do it because he was concerned deep down that it might upset Anthony’s feelings. Or was it because he was just a coward?

Anthony pointed to something he was working on. It was a piece of paper with a few words written on it.

“This is how I choose to spend my time,” he said still pointing to his little project.

Men die every day

As heroes? As fulfilled?

You might ask.

But my friend,

a hero is one who wins

his own heart,

the eternal gift.

When you are ready to do that

my friend,

you are on a conquest,

of becoming a hero.

“Well, it’s good,” Sahan said, after reading Anthony’s poem. But he secretly thought it was a piece of garbage.

“Thank you. Anyway, you must be in a university right?” Anthony asked.

“Yes, how do you know?” Sahan asked curiously.

“That explains why you’re studying those advanced books,” he replied jokingly.

At that point, Sahan noticed how some library-goers were looking at them in a rather unpleasant way, signaling them to stop talking.

“Sorry, I should go and eat something. I’m hungry,” Sahan said to Anthony, hoping to get rid of him.

“Ah yes, good idea. I’ll join you.” Anthony said joyfully.

Sahan was starting to hate himself at that point for agreeing to guide Anthony to the study hall. Now, the guy had become an annoying chatterbox.

While they were walking towards the cafeteria, the inquiring continued.

“So who do you want to be in the future, Sahan? Any specific goal?”

“I haven’t thought about it much, but I guess I’ll be able to continue my studies abroad, you know, learn further,” Sahan replied.

“And what do you want to learn about? Chemistry?” Anthony questioned.

“Yes, I guess, I like chemistry, but to be honest, I don’t know yet,” Sahan replied, hoping to put at least a pause to the conversation. He didn’t like to think about the future; after all, he had tried almost three times to end his own life.

“Sahan, can I tell you something?” Anthony asked, and before Sahan had a chance to answer, Anthony started talking again.

“Life is too precious to be uncertain. Do you really want to spend your time on what you’re doing right now? I mean, do you get an uncontrollable desire when you look at chemicals, does a lab make your mind go crazy?” Anthony asked.

“I don’t understand the question,” Sahan answered, confused.

“When someone is doing what he likes, he has this feeling, this desire to do that. This desire comes from the bottom of your heart. When it’s there, you know you’re doing the right thing; the right thing you’re supposed to be doing in this world, at least in this lifetime. Usually, people call it passion. But that word is overrated I guess,” Anthony clarified his comment while they were heading towards the cafeteria.

Sahan just nodded as Anthony talked. Honestly, Sahan wasn’t paying much attention to what Anthony was saying, but his words managed to make Sahan think about himself.

While they were ordering food, Sahan rushed to pay for Anthony’s. Of course, he did that to show him that he was a gentleman, a guy with proper manners. And deep down Sahan was expecting that Anthony would refuse his ‘act of kindness’ and pay for his food. But to his disappointment, Anthony did nothing. He just smiled and said, “Thank you!”

“What a guy! With all his know-it-all nonsense? He’s letting me pay for him. So much for a wise guy.” Sahan thought these things to himself as they were heading towards a table.

“Again, thank you for this. I didn’t have much on me anyway,” Anthony said with a smile.

“What do you do, Anthony? Are you a student?” Sahan asked, hoping to find out more about him.

“Well, a student of some sort, but I also do things here and there. I write, I dance and I sing sometimes, but most of the time, I volunteer at the animal shelter,” he replied.

As he replied to Sahan, his eyes lit up as if a kind of joyful energy had taken over him.

“Student of some sort?” Sahan questioned immediately. “What subjects do you learn?”

“Ah, not like that. I don’t learn to get a degree or anything. If I like something, I learn it. I find books and read on about it. I find people who are interested in that subject and talk about it with them. That’s how I learn, and that’s how, my friend, I am a student.”

“We’re all students you know? We all try to figure out life day by day. We learn about life not through textbooks, but mostly from our personal experiences, don’t you agree? Anthony asked Sahan after explaining himself.

“Well, yeah, but without a degree or qualification how would you expect people to believe you know about a particular thing? And how would you earn money in the future?” Sahan asked, this time with a hint of scorn in his voice.

“What you say is true, if we take up a naive attitude,” Anthony responded with a smile.

“You see, people tend to look at the world like they’re looking through some sort of filter. They tend to change their lives, change their goals, forget what they’re supposed to do in their lives, make conflicts with people, destroy their peace, and I could go on...because of one simple

factor, money. When you look at the world through this filter, money, you can't see the whole picture.

You can't enjoy this beautiful life if you're focused only on that. Money is just one component, that's all. The money will come to you when it's supposed to come. Trust me. You're not going to enjoy this life if you surrender yourself to money."

"Whenever I want money, I do things like painting, teaching, and so on. Things I love to do. I don't want to think that I need money to survive, rather, I like to think I need to be happy to survive," Anthony said, with a philosophical look in his eyes.

"Your parents must be providing you. Surely, you're talking about the pocket money they give?" Sahan asked sarcastically.

"To be honest, my mother passed away a long time ago...and my father disappeared when I was around ten. I live with my older brother," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry...I didn't know," Sahan replied, regretting his words.

"Oh no, don't be, you see my brother thinks the same as me. We don't tend to take life seriously. Like I said, money is just a part of life."

"So what happened, if I may ask? How did you two manage to survive by yourselves?"

"Well, we managed," Anthony said with a smile, "I'd rather not talk about my past. That's long gone now."

At this point, Sahan could not help but feel sympathy for Anthony. He felt kind of angry at himself too, for being irritated with Anthony, just because he didn't pay for his food. "*How did I become so low?*" Sahan asked himself.

"Look, if you need anything, just let me know, okay?" Sahan told Anthony, trying to cover up his guilt.

“Ah no, thank you for offering your help,” Anthony said while continuing to wear his pleasant smile. “I think we should head back now,” said Anthony.

While they were heading back, Sahan could feel a strange feeling taking over him. It was something he had never felt before. Maybe what he felt was the universe’s way of telling him that his life was about to change...

AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

A few days after the encounter with Anthony, Sahan almost forgot about him. Like everyone else, he also succumbed to the daily patterns and routines. For Sahan, the routine simply followed a framework of going to the university, lectures, coming home, surfing the internet, and sleeping. Honestly, he didn't have time to think about himself, his future, or how he could develop himself to become a more fulfilled human being.

He was sitting in the library, but this time his eyes gazed on a different book. It had something to do with romance. It was quite interesting to read a book like that on a Monday morning.

"Not chemistry, I see," he heard a friendly voice.

Sahan looked back and there was Anthony, wearing his innocent smile.

"No, I thought of reading a different book. I don't feel like studying right now," Sahan replied. At that moment he questioned himself about the choice of his book. "Of all the topics in the world, why romance?" he asked himself, feeling puzzled and embarrassed at the same time. Embarrassed because he thought it was silly for a guy to read about romance, or anything sensitive, for that matter.

"You chose to explore the beauty of this world," Anthony said.

“Well, it’s just for the sake of passing time. It’s not like I’m passionate about love or anything,” Sahan said, remembering that Anthony gave a lecture about passion the previous week.

“Ah, you can read anything you want. Everything you do doesn’t necessarily have to align with passion,” Anthony said.

For Sahan, Anthony’s philosophical ideas carried no meaning. He was getting rather annoyed with each profound comment he made.

“I think I should go back to studying chemistry now, the usual,” Sahan said with a meek smile.

“I’ll sit with you. I’m writing a new poem,” said Anthony.

“Okay,” Sahan said. He decided to bear with his company in the study hall.

After some time into studying, for Sahan at least, Anthony began to talk again.

“So, Sahan, I haven’t seen you since last Monday.”

“I come here only on Mondays.”

“Is there a reason for you to do that? Are you busy the other days?”

“Yes,” Sahan said, hoping to end the conversation quickly, or at least put a pause to it.

“If you don’t mind, I need to get back to studying. Let’s talk afterward,” he said in a demanding voice this time. Anthony agreed even though his facial expression begged to differ.

For the next two hours or so, Anthony didn’t disturb Sahan, and Sahan was focused on his task. But for Sahan, studying was harder this time. His mind was occupied with thoughts of how badly he had treated Anthony, and thoughts that justified his behavior. *“He should have respected the fact that this is a library, and not a public park, just to chat whenever he wants.”* Sahan tried to cover up his guilt by bringing a bit of anger to his mind.

“I’m going home now, Anthony, see you then,” Sahan said in a low voice.

“Oh, where do you live? Near? Far?” Anthony asked.

“Not very far actually, it’s a fifteen-minute walk.”

“Okay, I’m leaving too...I’ll come with you then.”

“Fine, Anthony,” Sahan agreed with a forced grin on his face.

It wasn’t noon yet, and Sahan blamed Anthony for disturbing his peace and sabotaging a perfect day of studying. If not for Anthony, he would still be at the library.

Sahan didn’t wait long for Anthony. He tried to walk a few feet ahead of Anthony. That was because he didn’t want to answer another set of Anthony’s questions.

“Are you heading down the street?” Anthony asked in a loud voice when Sahan was just outside the library’s gate.

“Yes, my house is this way,” Sahan said.

“I live down the street too,” Anthony said, running towards Sahan. Anthony had a bright smile on his face. Maybe because he had someone to walk with and talk to along the way.

Sahan didn’t want to walk with him. But what choice did he have? So he wore a fake smile and decided to put up with him.

“You didn’t answer my question yet,” Anthony said with a grin.

“What question?”

“Why do you come here only on Mondays?”

“I believe I gave you an answer. I am busy on the other days,” Sahan said.

“Oh, okay...whenever you’re free, try to come to the library. I spend most of my time there now,” Anthony said.

Honestly, Sahan wasn’t a busy individual. He didn’t even attend university lectures regularly. He went to the library because he had formed a habit of going there a long time ago.

Also, there were only a few people in the public library, unlike the one in his university. That's why he didn't want to go to the university library. Rather, coming to the public library was comfortable, even though there weren't many books written on the topics he was studying.

There was mostly silence as they walked down the street. Anthony seemed rather joyful and hummed a song to himself.

"Look, Sahan...over there." Anthony pointed out suddenly towards a bush.

There was a small puppy with a timid look in its eyes. It hid behind the bush each time a vehicle passed by.

"He's scared, we should help him," Anthony told Sahan, going towards the pup.

"What is it this time?" Sahan thought to himself. "Maybe its mother is nearby, we should let it be," he said.

"No, I don't think so. Look at its coat, it's dirty, and he must be hungry, I'm sure," Anthony said.

"Sahan, you stay here. I'll get something for him to eat."

Before Sahan could say anything, Anthony rushed towards a grocery shop. As Sahan was standing beside the puppy, he could not help but feel sorry for the pup. Its innocent eyes melted his heart.

"Who abandons these innocent creatures by the roadside to die alone?" Sahan thought to himself. This was the same Sahan who had thought of 'letting the pup stay there' a while ago. It's a mystery how little incidents can bring out the best in us.

Sahan started petting the pup. It was friendly and almost beside itself with happiness. No food, no water, no warmth, left to eat the dirt on the road...yet it was happy. It was ecstatic to see humans. The same creatures who had dumped it alongside the road.

As the pup licked Sahan's dry hands, Sahan saw Anthony running towards them with a packet of milk and a plastic cup.

"Here you go, baby," Anthony said while pouring the milk in the packet into the cup. While he offered the milk to the pup, Sahan could see that Anthony's eyes were all lit up. It was like he was possessed by some sort of positive energy. Seeing pure happiness on Anthony's face, Sahan felt a great amount of elation taking over him too. All of his grief, guilt, and worries vanished in an instant. At that moment, he felt like he was a different human being. Someone new.

"Let's stay here for a while," Anthony suggested.

They could see the pup was starving. It drank the milk like it was the last meal it would ever get. That sight kindled some sort of fire inside Sahan. A fire that felt good.

"I'll sit here and play with him a bit," Anthony decided.

"Sit here? Don't you think it's dirty?" Sahan asked.

"Yes, but dirt can be washed away. Besides I've always wanted to sit by the road for a long time now," Anthony said gleefully.

"Yeah, sure..." Sahan agreed, knowing very well that he would be scolded later on by his mother for getting his clothes dirty.

So they sat by the road and started playing with the pup. It was indeed a happy moment for the puppy. While playing with it, Sahan could feel how free he was. If he permitted himself, he could be happy and free, no matter the place, no matter the time.

His state of happiness was dampened by the looks of the passing pedestrians. Some threw looks at them that said 'these guys must be out of their minds', while others looked judgmental and disgusted at what they were doing. But most of the passersby watched them in some sort of

awe, and their expressions betrayed a subtle yearning; a yearning to join them and to go crazy in this restricted, so-called civilized world.

“Don’t mind them,” Anthony said, reading Sahan’s thoughts.

“You can’t be happy if you worry about others’ perceptions. If you feel good about what you’re doing and if it doesn’t cause anyone harm, you’re doing the right thing.”

“You can’t do anything if you pause and check for every random person’s approval,” he continued.

“I don’t even know who these people are, yet I worry about what they think of me,” Sahan thought to himself. “Anthony’s right, I can’t control what their opinions are, that is none of my business.”

“You’re right Anthony, I shouldn’t worry about something I can’t control. What I should do now is enjoy this moment to the fullest,” Sahan said to Anthony.

Anthony looked at Sahan for a while, his bafflement turning to awe.

“You’re right on track, Sahan,” he said joyfully.

For most of his life, Sahan tried to avoid populated places. He didn’t feel comfortable among strangers. Now that he thought about it, he realized that he was scared deep down that he would be judged, that the strangers would constantly look at him like he was doing something wrong. He felt like he was being judged for his mere existence in the world. That was why he always went only on Mondays to the library, the least populated day of the week there. The same fear led him to distance himself from the university as much as possible. He was simply afraid of the world. Can you blame him?

While he was lost in his thoughts, the pup came to him and licked his feet, inviting him to come to the present moment and enjoy it.

“We should name him, you know,” Anthony said. “Suggest a good name.”

“Anthony,” Sahan said, trying to be funny.

“That’ll create confusion,” Anthony said, chuckling.

“You sure it’s a he?” Sahan asked.

“Yeah, he is a he,” Anthony confirmed.

Sahan noticed that Anthony didn’t call animals ‘it’. Maybe he respected every being equally. After the little incident with the pup, Sahan found himself building respect for Anthony, for he was a kind-hearted human being.

“How about Doro?” Anthony asked.

“Sounds good, but what does it mean?”

“It’s a Greek word which means ‘gift’. I think this little guy is a gift to us. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah, we’ll name him Doro then,” Sahan replied, joy filling his heart.

“Anthony, you’re volunteering at the animal shelter, right? Are you taking this guy there?”

Sahan asked after some time.

“No, I think I’ll keep him with me,” Anthony said, looking at the warm, brown eyes of the puppy.

“Sure, that’s great, because I don’t think my parents will allow this puppy in my house,”

Sahan said, scratching his head.

“No worries Sahan. Doro will be happy with me. My brother will also love this cutie,”

Anthony said.

“Okay then, let me carry him to your house. Is it far?”

“It’s a bit far, but I can carry him Sahan. You don’t have to come,” said Anthony, abruptly, sounding distressed.

“It’s no problem, I insist.”

They walked on for about more than a mile. When Anthony showed Sahan where he lived, Sahan was rather shocked.

It wasn’t a house. It was more of a little establishment with roofing sheet coverings and wooden walls. “*How can someone live in this?*” Sahan thought.

“This is my home sweet home. I don’t think my brother is in though. I could have introduced my friend to him,” Anthony said with a smile.

“No worries, but how can you keep this guy with you?” Sahan asked, implying Anthony’s poor standard of living.

“We will be more than okay, this little guy won’t need much,” Anthony replied pleasantly.

For all this time, Doro kept wagging his tail, lying in the protection of Sahan’s arms. Maybe he sensed that he was getting a new home.

While Sahan was heading back, he could not help himself but feel a bit of sadness. A sadness because even though he had a lot less than Sahan, Anthony showed kindness towards the world. He radiated love and happiness. Sahan had almost everything he had ever hoped for, yet he could not open his eyes and look into the beauty of the world.

As he was nearing his home, he decided to get to know Anthony better, simply because Anthony could generate something inside him. A feeling of warmth and affection; an affection for life and the world.

ANTHONY'S PAST

Anthony was an average looking individual who had to go through many hardships in his childhood. Soon after learning that Anthony's mother had a rare disease, called achalasia, his father left, leaving the helpless mother and children behind. Even though the mother tried to hide her pain from her children, she couldn't. The emotional pain from the absence of her husband, and the physical pain, caused by the disease, was overwhelming.

Anthony and his brother knew what was going on and they tried their best to support their mother. Their mother had some savings and she used those to provide for her young children, neglecting possible treatment for her.

"Always treat others with kindness and you will never be sad..." She often told her children.

As the days went on, she found that she could not swallow food, even in liquid form. After some time passed, with much suffering, she laid on her bed and took her last breath beside her loving children.

Soon after she died, Anthony and his brother, Sebastian, were taken under their uncle's care. The uncle was a sweet and innocent fellow, with almost no money to even provide for his own family.

The uncle had three children, younger than Anthony and Sebastian. The brothers' sadness was soon nowhere to be found amidst the companionship of their cousins. They ran around, played with the other kids, and went to school together. As far as Anthony's memory served, it was a wonderful time in his life.

The aunt, the uncle's wife, was also a loving woman, but she and Uncle argued a lot. Mostly about their financial state.

One day, as the children were playing outside, Anthony saw his uncle coming home with a grim look on his face. He didn't even look at the kids as he passed them by and went inside the house.

The next day he found out that their uncle had been fired from his job. He had worked as a security guard for a firm nearby. One day three robbers broke in when Uncle was on duty. The robbers were armed with a pistol and knives, and Uncle didn't want to be a hero that day. After that incident, Uncle was let go. This episode meant that he could not get a security guard job any time soon.

Uncle's family lived in a small annexure which was rented. Even in the months with the job, he found it hard to pay up the rent. Now that he was out of a job, the family found that it was getting difficult to survive each passing day.

When life hits you, it makes sure to deliver its hardest blows. Anthony's uncle went to every place he knew, looking for a job. After a few days, he had to settle down as a janitor in a restaurant, and his boss was the meanest man he had ever met.

The uncle had to work for a low salary, a salary lower than what he used to earn. His boss made sure to show no kindness or sympathy towards him, making him work more than the job required. Now the uncle struggled even more to maintain five kids. Their aunt also tried to help

the family by sewing clothes and going door to door to sell them. But she made almost no money out of this. It wasn't even sufficient to buy materials for sewing.

When we look at someone, we don't see the suffering he or she is going through. All we see is the face in front of us. Further, most of us don't try to make an effort to empathize with strangers. The same thing happened to Anthony's aunt.

All the rejections, disappointments, and continuously worrying about the survival of her family made her mentally ill. Soon she began to imagine things and talk nonsense. Uncle had no choice but to put her in a government psychiatric facility. Luckily for him, this service was provided by the government free of charge.

Uncle made a habit of visiting his beloved wife almost every day with some home-made meals, even though the hospital provided food and care for her. Doctors told him that his wife was beyond curing, but his visits never stopped.

Anthony could not realize why these things happened to his beloved uncle. After all, he was an innocent man, who didn't like to inflict pain upon even a tiny insect. He was a man who refused alcohol, and he made sure that he brought home everything he earned. But apart from these things, it seemed like the universe had found a way to punish him, to punish the few good people in the world.

Anthony's brother always felt a responsibility to share the burden of providing for the family with Uncle. As the days were getting harder, Sebastian felt the urge to leave school and to provide for his little siblings. When he was just around sixteen, and Anthony thirteen, Sebastian joined a smithy, against the will of his uncle. No matter the circumstances, Anthony's uncle wanted to provide a good education to his children, including Anthony and Sebastian.

The first few days of working in the smithy were tough for Sebastian. The head blacksmith, his boss, didn't show any sign of mercy towards Sebastian, even though he was just a boy, struggling to learn all the techniques. The head blacksmith used Sebastian to do all the heavy lifting while he lounged around most of the time.

Sebastian was a bright kid. He didn't have much difficulty in learning at school. Without studying much, he could excel in his exams. In other words, he was a little genius.

After all, he was mostly concerned about his little brother. He wanted to make sure Anthony would have the life he truly deserved. While going through hell, Sebastian could only imagine his brother's innocent smile to seek comfort.

Time went by, and Sebastian became a highly skilled blacksmith. He always gave his fullest to the work, and slowly managed to impress the head blacksmith.

The head blacksmith had a little land that he didn't use anymore. A long time ago he had built a little hut-like establishment for his workers to stay temporarily. He wasn't a generous man. His generosity was something to be earned. So this hut wasn't a suitable place to live for anyone.

One day, the head blacksmith took Sebastian to the hut to get some repairs done. Sebastian had thought of moving out from Uncle's place for a long time now, as he thought he and Anthony should not be bothering their uncle anymore. So as soon as Sebastian saw the old hut, he asked from the head blacksmith,

"It's a nice place. Are you planning to sell it, Sir?"

"No, are you crazy, boy? Lands are worth keeping. I'm not a fool to sell it," the boss replied.

"Are you thinking of renting it out then?" Sebastian persisted.

For a moment, Sebastian's boss thought Sebastian was out of his mind. *"To rent out a place like this?"* he thought.

"Why, boy? Do you know anyone interested?" the boss asked with a cunning smile.

"Yes...I do know someone who would be, if this place has water and electricity," Sebastian replied.

"Well, I got those utilities some time ago. Not sure whether water is still available, though."

Sebastian checked for a tap and it worked fine.

"I would be happy to rent this place. What do you say, Sir?" Sebastian asked.

The head blacksmith was shocked for a moment. He didn't think that anyone would be willing to come and stay there, let alone rent it. He could not believe his luck that day and laughed in his mind at how foolish Sebastian was.

"How much do I pay you now, son?" the boss asked.

"Around twenty thousand, Sir... some months lesser than that," said Sebastian.

"From now on your salary is fifteen thousand rupees, and you can stay here," the boss replied.

Sebastian had no problem with that, as he was getting a new place for him and his brother. The amount Sebastian earned wasn't much. For that amount, you could barely scratch the surface of the average monthly expenses. With his reduced salary, Sebastian and Anthony would surely run into some difficult times.

When Sebastian told the story of the new place to his uncle, he wasn't pleased. He was worried about how the young boys would be able to manage by themselves and asked Sebastian to consider staying with him for a while longer.

“We can’t be a burden to you anymore, dear uncle. What you have done for us is more than enough,” said Sebastian.

When they were ready to head out from their uncle’s home, Anthony told Uncle something that he would remember for a long time.

“You’re our father, uncle. You have always been the father we needed.”

Some time passed by, and Anthony’s artistic abilities became famous among his friends. He wrote stories, poems, and even sang at his friends’ parties to earn money and support his brother. But he always reminded himself to read up on the infinite wisdom in the world, whenever he got time. As the recent attempt of improving his knowledge, he decided to join the local library, where he met his future best friend, Sahan.

A SCROLL FROM ANTHONY

Sahan was cleaning up a small, muddy alley riddled with paw-prints. While he was pouring water down the alley, he heard a voice calling him, amidst the loud barks of the dogs.

“When you’re done, Sahan, do you mind giving me a hand to feed these guys?” Anthony asked.

“Yeah, sure. Give me five minutes,” Sahan replied, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

Sahan was in a place he had never dreamed of visiting before. One day, Anthony decided to bring Sahan to the local shelter where he volunteered. At first, Sahan was reluctant to go, since he didn’t want to spend his time volunteering. But after the first visit, he became a regular visitor to the shelter.

There were so many helpless animals at the shelter. Dogs who had been abused, who had met with accidents and become paralyzed, beaten until their limbs had given out, and of course, some dogs had been dumped by the roadside, just like Doro, but hadn’t been fortunate enough to find someone to adopt them. There were many stray cats in a different area of the shelter as well. Because of some humans, they had ended up on the road, without a home. Despite their past, they were dying to give their love and warmth to anyone who entered the shelter.

While they were feeding the dogs, all Sahan could feel was compassion towards the poor animals. No matter what had happened earlier, they were ready to forget everything and spread love. The presence among these animals brought joy to Sahan, kindling a feeling of satisfaction inside him.

“Do you think they wag their tails just because we’re feeding them?” Sahan asked turning towards Anthony.

“No, that’s not true, they like you. They need love more than food, that’s why they’re wagging their tails,” Anthony said.

“Look, even if you don’t carry a food basket, they’ll be wagging their tails for you. They know you’re here to help. Animals can sense these things you know,” he continued.

After the work in the shelter, they found themselves resting on a bench, looking at a pack of dogs running around.

“I never thought I’d be volunteering in an animal shelter,” Sahan spoke, breaking the silence.

“Life is like that. You end up doing so many things you wouldn’t have even dreamed of doing,” said Anthony softly.

“Well, do you like coming here?” Anthony continued with his usual inquiring.

“Yeah...yeah, I mean it’s a lot of work, but I do like coming here.”

“It leaves you satisfied, doesn’t it?” asked Anthony.

Sahan looked at Anthony and smiled while nodding. It was a feeling that made you want to help other beings; animals and humans who were in need.

“Why do you think we feel this way after helping others?” Sahan asked this time.

“Maybe that’s what we need to do in the first place. You know, our purpose is to help others,” said Anthony.

“You see, I think we’re all connected, you, me, this guy here,” Anthony said, pointing towards a dog who was resting beside his leg.

“It may not seem like we’re connected, but we are all made of nature. We are all parts of nature. When we help others, we help ourselves actually...and it might be our mind’s way of telling us that we’re doing the right thing, by making us feel good,” Anthony further explained.

Sahan thought about what Anthony said for a while. “*Yeah that makes sense,*” Sahan said to himself.

“So...what we do in our life should be determined by whether we feel good about it or not,” pondered Sahan.

“As I said, if you help people, you feel good, but passion, let’s call it that, is beyond that.”

“How so?” Sahan asked.

“It’s beyond helping others, or helping yourself, for that matter. When you do what you’re truly supposed to do, you’re fulfilling a great purpose. All your energy will be in perfect harmony, aiding you. You’ll have a great desire to do that, but you’ll surely face many obstacles along the way too,” Anthony said.

“I’m truly confused right now. If all our energy is in perfect harmony, aiding us like you said, to fulfill this great purpose, why should there be obstacles?” Sahan inquired.

“Those are there to teach you, of course, to give you strength,” Anthony replied.

“Yes, we feel the desire to do what we are supposed to do, yes we are greatly driven by passion, but that’s not enough. Most importantly, you have to be wise, you’ve got to be strong,

and you have to be worthy to be a part of fulfilling the purpose of the universe. You have to think you're capable enough to play your part," Anthony told Sahan.

"These obstacles, these barriers, are the keys to learning about ourselves and our journey. They're lessons to make ourselves strong. When you think long and hard, you will see the obstacles you faced along the way did make you strong and resilient, rather than doing you harm," he continued.

"Life is a never-ending training, a continuous lesson. Whether you learn from it is up to you. If you're a worthy student of life, the universe will aid you," Anthony said with a smile.

"But I've no idea what my passion is," said Sahan.

"Relax my friend. All will be revealed in time. Have patience and let the universe guide you," Anthony said, fixing a gentle gaze on Sahan.

"Have a look at this." Anthony handed Sahan a note from his wallet. "Something I wrote a while ago".

Story of a river

One day, I came across a great river.

"What a gorgeous sight."

I asked the river,

"Oh, beautiful river? What is your secret? How did you become so majestic?"

The river looked at me. Beaming, she said,

"I was a child a long time ago, all I had was a few droplets.

One day I started flowing to heal the harsh earth".

"My dear,

Many droplets joined me, earth smiled at me,

And rain, well, he made me stronger, day by day.”

When I was just a stream, the sun asked me,

“What are you doing, running like that?”

“Oh mighty sun, I was just aiding this earth.

It cannot bear your heat, the plants are dying,”

I said to the sun.

“The mighty sun said, “Prove me you are worthy, then I shall aid you in your quest.”

So the sun tried with his might, to make me weak.

He sent his heat on to me, but I held on.

I lost some drops, but my drops held on tight, to each other, with all our courage.

Finally,

The mighty sun said,

“Very well, you have proven you are capable, I shall send my brother to help you.”

So the moon came at night, smiled at me,

And removed the sun’s heat from me.

His good friend, rain, rewarded me by giving me more drops.

Day by day,

I grew larger, I grew stronger.

I invited the children of the tree family.

“Come near me, quench your thirst, grow your arms, and grow deep into the earth.”

I invited the children of the animal family.

“Come, children, bathe with me, drink with me, have shelter in the trees.”

Fish were swimming with me,

*Birds were flying around me,
Many came and quenched their thirst.
But children of the earth, the clods of clay, they were mischievous, they asked me,
“What you are doing is of no use. Where are you running anyway?
You should have stayed with the few drops you had”
I did not care, I kept flowing,
Then they came to me, started making my body dirty.
I kept flowing, I never stopped.
They tried to stand their ground, tried to slow me down.
I kept flowing, I never stopped.
Sometime later, they gave up.
Alas!
They were not little clods of clay anymore.
I found gems, precious stones.
My journey had made worthless clay into precious stones.
But my happiness was not for long.
“Stop right there, we will not let you go,” said large rocks.
I did not care, they slowed me down.
But I never stopped.
When I could not flow above them, I flowed under.
When I could not flow under, I coursed around them.
They knew they had lost. They said,
“You are strong. Let us make you beautiful.”*

They went to different places and made me beautiful by their presence.

“We will help you flow better,” said some big rocks.

So they made a cliff, making a graceful waterfall.

“Why did you help these children of the earth?”

They tried to destroy you,” asked the children of the animal family.

“I help everyone, that’s why I am so beautiful.”

When you help,

You cannot choose who deserves your help.

One day, I saw my lover,

And for all this time,

I was going towards him.

My purpose was clear.

The sea hugged me with his open arms.

“You are finally here.”

He said welcoming me.

“I think it’s clear now,” said Sahan looking at the endless clear blue sky.

A JOURNEY TO REMEMBER

A few months went by since Sahan's first encounter with Anthony at the library. Their friendship grew stronger each day. Anthony's presence brought Sahan a sense of calm and freedom. Sahan found himself opening up to Anthony day by day. The same applied to Anthony as well.

It was a cold evening and the sun was slowly fading into the horizon. Sahan was at Anthony's place, busy playing with Doro. Anthony was staring at the sunset, and by the looks of it, he was drowned in an ocean of thoughts.

"Sahan, let's enjoy this life to the fullest, what do you say?" Anthony said, coming out of his contemplation.

"What do you mean?" Sahan asked with a perplexed look.

"Well, let's create some memories. I want to experience things more."

"Okay...I still don't understand, what experiences?" Sahan asked even more confused.

"Let's explore what life has to offer. We'll go sightseeing, adventure sporting...whatever we want," said Anthony enthusiastically.

"Slow down. You have your whole life ahead of you to experience things. No rush, okay...it's not like you're going to die tomorrow." This time Sahan was the one who gave advice.

“We don’t know that...death may be closer than we think it is,” Anthony said.

“I want to experience life as much as I can before I die, or at least before I lose my mind,” he continued.

“What do you mean?” Sahan asked.

“No, I just meant we’ve got to live life to its fullest. No point in waiting.”

“I’m thinking of going on a trip to the Central Highlands. I would like it if you could join me,” Anthony requested.

Sahan wasn’t the type of person who liked to open himself up to new things; at least he needed time to adjust. For all of his life, he had always planned things out. Most of the time, he refrained from having new experiences, because deep down he was scared that something might go wrong and he would lose control of the situation. For the past few months or so, Sahan had slowly started to feel good about himself. He had found he was capable of loving. But Anthony’s sudden proposition was an unexpected blow to him. He still had his fears and worries. Now, all of these feelings started to come to the surface, creating great anxiety.

“I don’t think that it’s a good idea. And I think you shouldn’t go alone either. If you want to go, take your brother with you,” Sahan said.

“He’ll be busy Sahan. If you don’t want to come, that’s fine,” Anthony said.

“But why don’t you want to come?” he inquired.

“I don’t feel like going to some strange place, just like that,” replied Sahan.

“Don’t worry my friend, I’ll take care of you. You can’t give in to fear. You must experience new things. Otherwise, you’ll regret it someday,” Anthony said to Sahan in a soothing voice.

Sahan thought about Anthony's suggestion after he went home. "Maybe he's right, I should go with him for a change," he decided, even though he was still doubtful.

Two days later, they packed enough clothes for around three days and got into a bus to leave for the Central Highlands.

"Where are we going exactly?" Sahan asked on the bus.

Anthony smiled and thought about an answer. To be honest, he didn't even know where to go.

"You'll see, you won't regret coming with me," he replied.

After the bus stopped in the city, they got down and went for a walk around the area. It was an ancient city, carefully planned and built. However, its archaic beauty was slowly fading away with modern constructions.

While they were walking around, Sahan wondered about how the ancient kings had ruled, and what kind of an experience it must have been for the citizens.

"Were they depressed, stressed...or were they actually happy?" he thought to himself.

His musings were interrupted by Anthony's suggestion.

"Sahan, let's go hiking."

"What? I don't have hiking shoes, plus where are we going to hike?" Sahan asked.

"No problem, my friend. I don't have hiking shoes either," he told Sahan, pointing at his old shoes. "These'll do," he said with a smile.

"There will always be excuses before we do something we aren't comfortable with," Anthony started his usual lecturing. "But we have to challenge ourselves, we can certainly be happy that way."

“The view from the top of the mountain is quite amazing, they say. It’ll be worth the trouble.”

“If you say so,” Sahan sighed, knowing that there was no point in arguing with Anthony.

There was a hikers’-favorite mountain situated a bit farther from the city. It held a religious significance as well. During some periods of the year, the mountain was filled with crowds who climbed to worship it. But the mountain was very lonely at this time of the year since it wasn’t the pilgrimage season.

The mountain had two pathways. One, made by pilgrims a long time ago, led to a Kovil which was built at the top of the mountain. The other pathway, the difficult one, went through a thick forest.

“Let’s take the forest path,” Anthony said.

Not knowing the difference between the two paths, Sahan agreed.

It was an arduous journey, more tiresome than they both had thought. They had to move through a muddy trail that was covered with bushes, cliffs, and rocks. Sahan wasn’t good at hiking; in fact, he wasn’t good at anything which demanded physical endurance. More than that, he oftentimes feared that he would fall along the way, or that he would simply slip. It was a wonder how he was trying to cling to life now, the same thing he was ready to give up a few months ago.

Anthony led the way, clearing the trail and making sure it was safe from serpents and insects. Amidst Sahan’s complaints about how difficult the trip was, and Anthony’s cheery, soothing comments, they came to a place that looked suitable to rest and catch their breaths for a while.

“Do you see that tree over there?” Anthony asked pointing to a lone tree that stood on the edge of a cliff.

The tree looked magnificent. It was balancing on the edge, leaning towards the mountain, digging its roots deeper into the earth. Some roots were even visible since they rose above the surface.

“Don’t you find it amazing?” asked Anthony looking admiringly at the tree.

“Yes, it looks beautiful,” replied Sahan.

“More than beauty, it shows strength.”

“It stands alone, right? That means there were a few trees around this, but they must have fallen off, maybe because of soil erosion I guess,” Anthony said.

“What I admire about the tree is that it never gave up. By looking at the roots you can say it attached itself harder to the mountain, refusing to fall,” he continued.

“Also it’s pretty windy up here. Look at the trunk, it looks pretty strong to me. It must have built its strength to challenge the winds.”

“That’s why it looks majestic,” Sahan said looking at Anthony.

“Yes, anything that resembles courage and strength, shows a beauty one of its kind. It’s a sort of rare, majestic beauty,” said Anthony, calmly.

After getting enough rest, they continued their hike towards the peak of the mountain. The higher they went, the more dazzling the view was; the sight of the valley, the forest. They could even see the city and some villages too.

Sahan signaled Anthony that they should pause a bit and enjoy the scenery. Sahan looked down at the city. Vehicles now looked like little insects running around, and the city looked calm, somehow, as if the hustle and bustle had vanished.

“Thousands of people live there, yet all of them look insignificant up here,” Sahan said.

“Why do you say that?” asked Anthony, with a rather unsuccessful attempt to hide his joy. Anthony was pleased that Sahan was beginning to think about these things. To have a larger perspective of reality.

“No, I mean, we run here and there, always busy. I don’t see any point in that,” Sahan said.

“When we’re running around doing someone else’s work, we forget about the things that matter, the beautiful little things. We don’t give ourselves even a tiny break to enjoy the beauty, to take a fresh, nice, and deep breath, to pause and rest,” Anthony said to Sahan.

After a pause, Anthony continued,

“I think we’re fooling ourselves, with all this work. We don’t have to get busy you know, we just can do what makes us happy instead.”

“Or...we can get busy doing whatever we love” said Sahan with a smile.

“You’re damn right my friend,” Anthony said, returning Sahan’s smile.

“Anyway, let’s head for the peak. I bet the view will be astounding from up there. It won’t be far, let’s go” Anthony said, pulling his backpack.

The trail up to the mountain wasn’t as difficult as they thought it would be. Sure, there were some obstacles. But it was relatively easier compared to the trail so far.

“Here we are,” Anthony shouted happily.

“How does it feel, my friend, coming to the peak, after a tiresome journey?” he asked.

“Feels like I am free, I guess,” Sahan replied, unable to describe the feeling properly.

“Free from the daily dramas and nuisances, right? Here you have total silence, on the top of the mountain,” Anthony said.

“Yeah, that’s true,” said Sahan, looking below at the magnificent view.

“What a wonderful creation this is,” Sahan thought to himself.

“Why don’t we realize how beautiful the world is,” asked Sahan still looking down below.

“We’re truly living in an incredible world.”

“We can’t see real beauty until we check ourselves out from the day-to-day stuff. You see, we have to look at the bigger picture by creating some distance, and pausing to think.”

“Everything, even the tiniest things, have a meaning, a larger meaning. We don’t see why and how things play out in our life because we are trying to react, instead of observing,” said Anthony.

“We have to distance ourselves to see the larger picture, is that what you mean, Anthony?” Sahan asked, perplexed.

“Okay, let me explain. Look over there, look at the streams. The rocks you see were formed to aid the flowing of the streams. Trees are growing on the banks of the streams, and I’m sure lots of animals are living in the shelter of those trees.”

“So?” Sahan interrupted.

“You see, all those things form a kind of network. A network to sustain life, produce water, and distribute it. That is a wonderful creation. You can see how every part is interconnected in that network, each playing a role.”

“But you can’t see how these things work, the connections between each other, unless you distance yourself. We did that by coming to the top of the mountain. We now have a distant view. In other words, we can see a bigger picture now.”

“The same goes for our lives too, my friend...what happens in life, how things play out is a mystery. We can’t see what is going on simply by looking at life as it is. We need to think, quiet our minds, and look at the bigger picture. Each event happening to us has a purpose like the universe has a written script for all of our lives already. You can call it fate, God’s plan, or the

plan of the universe. What you need to do is observe what is happening and question why certain things happen in a certain way.”

“You have to be proactive instead of being reactive. We’re designed to react to whatever changes happen in our environment, and that helped us to survive a long time ago. We don’t need that now. What we need is patience and calmness in our minds, to realize what’s going on,” said Anthony.

“If every one of us has a plan, then what’s the point of trying to make our lives better? Everything will play out perfectly in the end, right?” Sahan said, mocking Anthony’s explanation.

“Well, it’s like this. The universe has a plan, yes, and it helps our lives by shaping events, yes. But, as I said, if we react to every tiny thing that happens in our life, without understanding the bigger picture, we’ll spend our entire lives busy reacting without understanding what we truly need to do.”

“The universe’s attempts to make us realize our purpose will go in vain, and so will our chance to live our lives in a more fulfilled and purposeful manner,” said Anthony.

“But that’s what we do, right? Getting angry, worried, and stressed out all the time over insignificant things?” Sahan asked.

“Yes, that’s why we need to change the way we’ve lived so far,” Anthony said, looking down at the beautiful scenery from the mountain.

“How does he know so much?” Sahan asked himself. For a minute, he felt that Anthony was some kind of wise philosopher.

Maybe what had happened to Anthony in the past had made him stronger. Maybe Anthony was wise enough to listen to the universe and realize what he needed to do in this life.

“We’ll take the other road to get down. It’ll be difficult until we reach the Kovil, after that, it’ll be an easy way down,” suggested Anthony.

“Good,” Sahan agreed, jumping at the chance to take the easy route.

After another tedious trip down, they saw the Kovil. It had been built a long time ago and added extra beauty to the mountain.

They washed their feet and entered the Kovil. There was nobody inside at the moment. Or at least they didn’t see anyone. The Kovil looked magnificent inside. There were various statues, drawings, and sculptures that mesmerized Sahan and Anthony.

When they decided to come out of the Kovil, they saw a man just entering. He looked like a yogi, with a full-grown beard and a piercing look in his eyes, except he wore modern clothes; a loose T-shirt and shorts. He made sure to remove his shoes before entering, which signaled that he was familiar with Hindu practices. *He’s not from around here*, Sahan thought, *judging by the looks of him*.

When Sahan and Anthony smiled at him, he didn’t care. He simply entered the Kovil. This made Sahan uneasy. *“After all, one should return a smile when given,”* he thought.

When the two friends came outside, Anthony suggested they wait and talk to the stranger.

“He didn’t even smile at us. Maybe he doesn’t like our company, or he’s simply a jerk,” Sahan replied.

“He’s alone. He’ll like our company,” Anthony said.

“I think it’s his nature, to not smile...some people don’t like smiling, I guess,” Anthony continued, beaming.

They waited on a bench outside until the stranger finished his worshipping. When he saw the two friends, to their astonishment, he smiled and greeted them. “Hello”.

“Are you guys here to explore, or do you live around here?” he asked.

“We came on a hike. On our way down we thought of coming here and resting a bit,” replied Anthony.

“Good. I’m Ajit, from India,” the stranger introduced himself.

“Anthony and this is Sahan.”

“Are you here on vacation?” asked Anthony after introducing themselves.

“Yeah, more or less. I’m here to visit a friend and thought of traveling the country,” he replied.

“Are you going down? Because I’m heading down now,” he asked.

“Yes, we’re heading down too. Mind if we join you?” asked Anthony.

“By all means. We can chat along the way,” Ajit said happily, indicating he liked the company.

For all this time, Sahan was silent. He thought that Ajit, the stranger, was a hot-head at first. But he turned out to be a friendly guy. He judged poorly, based on one simple factor; that he failed to return Sahan’s smile. We’re always expecting something in return from the world. If we do a good deed, we expect people to appreciate us. If we give a smile, we expect the other person to smile in return, completely defeating the purpose of giving a smile in the first place.

“So, how long are you planning to stay here?” Anthony asked.

“No idea...as long as I feel like staying, I guess,” Ajit replied.

“Does your work permit that?” Sahan suddenly asked, in a surprised manner.

“I don’t work in an office. I am a yoga teacher, you see” Ajit replied calmly.

“So what about the students? They’ll be left alone without a teacher until you go back,” Anthony asked this time.

“Ah no, I have a friend. He’ll be teaching them until I return,” Ajit replied.

“So why did you come alone?” Sahan asked. It was like Sahan and Anthony were interrogating Ajit.

“I like to travel alone, at my pace. I can enjoy the scenery, I can connect with nature, and I’m free to do whatever I want,” he replied.

“So where are you planning to go next?” Anthony asked, carefully planting his steps. It was a steep area on the mountain.

After a brief pause, Ajit replied, “I’m hoping to visit some temples around here. You’re welcome to join me if you guys are free,” he invited the two friends.

“Yes, definitely,” Anthony replied excitedly before Sahan could say anything.

Sahan and Anthony hadn’t decided what to do after hiking on the mountain. Now they had somewhere to go, at least for tomorrow. Often, we don’t get to plan out our life and we just have to be ready. Opportunities might present themselves at our doorstep. That is how the universe works.

“Where are you two staying tonight? Do you have a tent or a place to stay?” Ajit asked.

“Not at the moment, not really. We were hoping to stay at a rest house maybe,” Anthony replied. Until then he hadn’t thought about it. This made Sahan realize how poor Anthony was in planning things.

“You can join me, I have a tent. We’ll also make a campfire, sing some songs, and dance around a bit,” Ajit suggested.

At that point, Sahan thought Ajit was a godsend. The person he earlier thought was a jerk had become their savior at that moment.

After the successful completion of the hike, they reached a stream.

“This is a good place to build a tent. We can get water from the stream. The earth’s dry here as well,” said Ajit.

They started building Ajit’s tent on the place he suggested. Sahan, who had zero knowledge of setting up a tent, started to collect firewood for their campfire.

They finished setting up their tent and Sahan piled up some wood for the campfire. After their work was done, Anthony suggested, “Why don’t we jump into this stream and have a nice bath? Then we can start cooking something.”

“Yes, good idea. We’ll clean up first,” Ajit agreed happily.

Sahan was also yearning to have a refreshing bath. So he was the first to jump into the stream.

For a second, he thought he had lost control of his body. He started to regret his decision to jump in so suddenly. He didn’t feel his legs...

“Get ready for the cold if you dare to jump,” he shouted.

The water was freezing which gave it a unique freshness. Sahan had not expected the water to be this cold, so his body wasn’t prepared.

He started swimming upwards the stream. The chill and the current which was gently pushing him excited him greatly. He felt like he had been woken up as a free spirit by the cold.

The sun was setting in the horizon, its last brownish-red rays reflecting on the surface of the water. It was a beautiful sight indeed. Sahan considered himself lucky enough to experience such a moment.

After a nice swim and relaxing bath, they came out and planned what to cook.

“I have some packs of noodles, and a pot to cook them in too...so, not to worry,” Ajit told them in a soothing voice.

“I have some coffee powder. Shall we drink a hot cup of coffee first?” Anthony suggested.

“A mightily good idea...” Ajit agreed happily.

After their delicious dinner, they started making the campfire. They made a fire to cook their food, but that wasn’t enough, so they added more firewood.

“We have to be responsible, or else we’ll end up creating a wildfire,” Ajit said playfully.

They gathered around the campfire and started to sing. Anthony took the lead of the singing. Even though Ajit didn’t understand the meaning of the songs Anthony sang, he seemed to enjoy himself.

A short while later, all three of them started dancing, singing, and joyfully clapping their hands, disturbing the deep silence of the forest. Sahan had never found himself enjoying the moment this much, and he felt free...and that was a feeling he felt after a long time...

The next day, Sahan woke up early in the morning to find Ajit practicing some yoga moves. By the looks of it, Ajit was a pro at what he was doing, bending his body into near-impossible poses. When he saw Sahan, he shouted,

“Ah, Sahan, come join me. I’ll teach you some yoga moves.”

Sahan didn’t want to join. He knew clearly that his body wasn’t as half as flexible as Ajit’s was. He thought of politely declining the offer as he didn’t want to embarrass himself.

“I think I might pass. Bit sore after yesterday’s dancing, I guess,” Sahan said.

“Certainly this will help you. You’ll feel much better after,” Ajit insisted.

To make things worse, Anthony woke up and shouted, “I’ll join you. Sahan, I think you should too. After all, we’ve got a chance to learn yoga from a teacher.”

Sahan couldn't stand idly while Anthony and Ajit practiced yoga. One thing he feared most was the feeling of isolation. So he agreed to join.

Ajit taught Sahan and Anthony some moves and a sequence called the 'Sun Salutation'. With much difficulty, Sahan performed the moves. It was easier for Anthony though.

After their practice, Sahan wanted to know more about yoga. He asked,

"Why yoga, Ajit? I mean if you're into fitness, you could have just become a personal trainer."

It took a while for him to realize the stupidity of his question.

"Yoga is beyond that, Sahan. Yoga helps to connect your mind and body into one. Just like in meditation. In yoga, you turn inward, into your mind and body, increasing your inner awareness."

"This is an ancient practice. Much older than you and I think. This practice is performed by connecting with nature. You realize that you're one with nature, that you're a product of these natural elements."

"I can go on, but I might bore you," Ajit wanted to check whether the two friends were really interested.

"Please do..." Sahan requested.

"Okay, let me start from the beginning. While performing yoga, I told you to take deep breaths, right? And I asked to inhale and exhale at specific points?"

"Yes," replied Anthony.

"Breath is the most crucial thing for your body, and it is the most apparent way to see that we're always in exchange with nature. We take, and we give. So by controlling your breath, you're also bringing focus to your body, which involves the mind."

“It’s meditating in its pure sense, and you become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your body. You try to listen to your body, which in turn improves the focus of your mind. When you’re doing yoga, your mind seldom runs hither and thither, because your body is signaling your mind to focus.”

“The moves, we call them asanas, serve specific purposes. Yes, they target specific parts of your body and improve them, but they also regulate the energy flow within your body. That’s why I said yoga makes you one with nature.”

“It improves your metabolism, digestion, blood circulation...you name it,” Ajit further continued.

“From my personal experience, yoga helped me find who I truly was. What my natural emotional states were. It guides you to become who you’re, instead of suppressing your true self to become who society wants you to be,” Ajit said.

“I’ve just scratched the surface. Yoga is an ancient science that you can master to improve your emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being. It definitely serves a higher purpose than making you fit,” Ajit said, looking at Sahan.

“Quite a lot,” Anthony said in awe.

“You’ll realize the true benefits when you practice,” Ajit said with a pleasant smile.

Sahan stayed still for a while in total silence. “*Could this be true, or was Ajit making stuff up?*” Sahan wondered. “*Again, Ajit had no reason to make up lies, he couldn’t gain anything from it. Plus, for an ancient practice like this to exist for such a long time...maybe it does have these benefits.*” he thought to himself. Sahan could not help but wonder what he had been missing for all this time. He had not even thought of living his true life before, to do what he wanted to do or to question his life.

Instead, he did what most of us choose to do, trying to live his life up to others' standards, doing what they wanted him to do, becoming a person he thought the others wanted him to become. It was no wonder he had been fed up with his life and tried to kill himself!

As per Anthony's suggestion, the three of them jumped into the water again and got freshened up. They were ready to visit the Buddhist temple.

"Ajit, why are you interested in Buddhism?" Anthony asked when they were heading towards the villages.

"To be honest, I'm interested in anything. The spiritual teachings are the ultimate guide for one to lead his life. We can't put a label on these teachings, and we have to learn everything. Each teaching and philosophy offers a different perspective and limitless wisdom.

"People are foolish when they limit themselves to just one religion or philosophy. Rather than following wisdom, they tend to stick only to rituals. People only want a sense of belonging, I guess." he continued.

Sahan wasn't a firm believer in anything. He had never wanted to explore this so-called spiritual side before. He hadn't even thought about it until he met Ajit. The wisdom Ajit had, the energy he radiated, certainly told something about him, maybe the power of tapping into one's spiritual side.

They came to a settlement that resembled a village. Everyone they passed never forgot to greet them with a warm smile. After a while, Anthony suggested it might be a good idea to ask for directions to the temple.

Anthony went ahead and asked for directions, while Ajit and Sahan were waiting by the side of the road. A friendly dog came by and wagged her tail, greeting them.

“We have to take that road and go straight ahead,” Anthony said, coming towards them. The road went through a patch of forest. As soon as they entered the forest, a sense of calm took over Sahan. The dog who had greeted them earlier was heading in front of the trio as if she was guiding them.

After a relaxing walk along the forest road, they reached the village temple. Even the sight of the temple brought a sense of inner peace and serenity to Sahan’s mind.

The dog ran towards a Bhikshu and greeted him by wagging her tail. While petting the dog, the Bhikshu looked at the trio with a greeting smile.

They removed their shoes and stepped barefoot on the sand. Neither Sahan, Anthony nor Ajit had a clear idea of what to do next. Sensing their confusion, the Bhikshu asked gently,

“You’re not from around here, am I right?”

“Yes, we were wondering whether we could learn meditation,” Ajit asked, cautiously. He knew that meditation wasn’t something you could learn in one sitting, or one day, for that matter. He thought the Bhikshu would think badly of them for asking such a thing. That’s why he added extra care and respect to his voice.

“You’re welcome to learn... Are you planning on staying? You can stay at the temple if you like”. The Bhikshu suggested with a smile.

“Unfortunately...we don’t think we can stay,” Ajit replied with a bit of hesitation in his voice.

“Ah...that is alright...I will start from the basics then.” the Bhikshu replied.

What amazed Sahan was the level of humility of the Bhikshu. The Bhikshu was the one who should demand respect, yet he treated everyone with the utmost dignity. Even the animals.

“If you could sit with me, please” the Bhikshu invited.

It was difficult for Sahan to sit on the floor with crossed legs. Anthony managed somehow and it was an easy thing for Ajit. Probably because he performed the posture every day in his yoga sessions.

“Meditation can be done seated, lying down, walking, or even when you’re eating. But you will see why I asked you to sit like this in a minute,” the Bhikshu said with a smile.

“Now focus on your breathing first. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Focus on the area right below your nose and above your upper lip. See whether you can feel the air touching your skin.”

Sahan could not feel anything. He just felt the movement of his body, which was all he could feel. “*How can I focus on something I don’t notice?*” He asked himself, feeling irritated, right at the beginning of the meditation.

“If you do not feel anything, that’s okay...take some deep breaths and see where you can feel the air touching your body. Focus on those parts. Once you get a sense of where the air touches, you may breathe normally again. No control...just observing with your attention,” the Bhikshu instructed in a low voice.

This time he could feel the air touching the area right below his nose; he felt how the air came and went.

“Observe everything...how the air comes and goes, you might inhale the air through one nostril, and exhale from the other. Observe how the cool air comes in and hot air goes out. Observe

everything. Is your breath deep, or shallow? Observe everything, without trying to change anything.”

Sahan focused on his breath for a few seconds, then suddenly found himself thinking about how cold the stream was earlier...then his thoughts were disturbed by the Bhikshu’s instructions.

“It is the mind’s nature to wander, thoughts will come...come back to the breath. Each time this happens, come back to the breath.”

He found that it was getting harder and harder to concentrate. Whenever he tried to focus, the mind ran away...like an animal running here and there. He became frustrated by this. “*This is harder than it looks,*” he thought. He wanted to just give up and open his eyes. But since there was total silence, he felt that he would be embarrassed if he saw Anthony and Ajit, as the quiet indicated they were continuing with their meditation.

To make things worse, Sahan’s legs and back started to ache. After all, he wasn’t used to sitting like this. He quickly changed his posture to relax his legs.

Sensing that Sahan had changed his original position, the Bhikshu instructed, “It is okay to change your posture...for now. For this meditation, your primary focus should be on your breath. But try to hold your posture a while longer by choosing to focus on your breath, instead of other sensations.”

It was getting harder and harder... “*Why do people meditate even though it’s so boring and difficult?*” he thought. For a while, he felt helpless against his mind. Each time thoughts enveloped his mind, he resolved to focus on the breath, as it was his only option.

“Try not to change anything... this is who you’re at this moment. No judgments, accept things as they are,” the Bhikshu further instructed.

After some time, which felt like an eternity, the Bhikshu said,

“Now shift your focus from the breath to sensations of the body. Do not try to change your posture...just observe from your head to your toes...see what is happening in your body.”

“You may feel tingling sensations, warm, cold, moist sensations...whatever it is, observe what is happening in your body from the head to the toes, then from the toes to the head.

“You may feel an aching, pain, and itching in some parts...whatever they are, observe those feelings without trying to get rid of them. Observe the sensations. Are they getting stronger, or weaker? Try to observe their behavior”

Sahan observed the sensations as per the Bhikshu’s instructions. It was easy to observe them than focus on his breath. He found that it was easier to maintain his concentration now. His mind wasn’t so restless.

After some time into the meditation, the Bhikshu gently asked the trio to open their eyes slowly and end their meditation.

“It was difficult, wasn’t it?” the Bhikshu asked with a gentle smile.

“Oh yes, very...” Anthony replied, to Sahan’s amazement. By Anthony’s reaction, Sahan knew the meditation was as difficult for Anthony as it had been for him.

“Well, it will get easy with practice. However, getting comfortable with meditation is not the goal here,” the Bhikshu started explaining.

“I asked you to focus on your breath first, by focusing on a specific point in your body. This helps you to sharpen your mind, to strengthen the concentration capability of the mind. Without sharpening your mind, your focus and attention will be weak. After being able to retain focus somewhat, we moved to observing the sensations.”

“Keep in mind, that this is a novel experience for your body and mind. So your mind will rebel at first, thoughts will come more powerfully, and your body will start to develop sudden aches and pains while meditating...This is completely normal.”

“I asked you to stay in the same posture without trying to change, regardless of aches and pains, right? That is because, by staying still, without reacting, we accept reality. We train our minds to face the world as it is. We do not judge what is best for us and what is bad for us. We cultivate inner calmness inside ourselves.”

“There is another important, perhaps the most important, insight we can grasp through meditation. You must have realized, no matter how strong the body sensations were, they did not stay there forever, even if you stayed in the same posture, like a statue. This teaches us nothing is permanent, at its basic level.”

“How we live and the actions we take in our daily lives are based on two main things; *craving* and *aversion*. We crave the things we like, and we avoid the things we do not. The best example is, when we experienced pain, we tried to change the posture, which is aversion. And you did change your posture to a more comfortable one, right? That is craving, craving for comfort.”

“The unhappiness and dissatisfaction in our lives exist because we are always struggling to change reality as we want. When we accept things as they are, without giving in to these cravings and aversions, we will find more happiness in our lives,” the Bhikshu said.

“I humbly request you to continue practicing meditation, to understand about your life, and about yourself. This will help you to realize certain truths when you advance in your journey”

For a moment, Sahan stayed still. He didn't know what to do or what to say. Judging from the body language of the others, Sahan thought that they must've also felt the same as him. Sahan

felt like he had accomplished a goal. He felt as if the emptiness inside him had suddenly vanished, at least for a moment. His mind was calm and quiet.

The Bhikshu was kind enough to offer some food to the three friends. He didn't forget to offer some food to the dog who came with the trio, as well. He was glad to share whatever he had and he radiated inexplicable positive energy. Sahan could feel his mind calming down in the presence of the Bhikshu.

After they left the temple, Sahan could sense that he was somehow different from the person who had entered the temple before. He felt elated...

"I'm thinking of walking around the villages a bit more," Ajit said after they returned to the village.

"This is goodbye then, I guess," Anthony said, turning towards him.

"You taught us a lot, Ajit, we were lucky to meet you," said Sahan, expressing his sincere gratitude.

"Ah, my pleasure, you guys have been awesome," said Ajit.

"We will meet again, who knows?" Ajit said, shaking Anthony's and Sahan's hands.

On the bus, all Sahan could think of was how the journey had changed his perspective on life. He felt like he was heading in the right direction in life.

"Thank you, Anthony, for inviting me to come with you...you're a good friend," Sahan said, fondly.

"Good friend? I was hoping you would say...I don't know, best friend?" Anthony said jokingly.

EVERYTHING MUST COME TO AN END

The two friends became very close over the next few months, and Sahan found himself going along with life easily, not bothering over petty things. Doro was getting bigger and bigger each day, never leaving Anthony's side.

"Sahan, what do you think about people who die when they're young? Do you think they missed out on life?" asked Anthony out of nowhere, one day.

Sahan looked at Anthony for a while, not knowing how to answer appropriately.

"What do you mean 'missed out'?" Sahan asked.

"They didn't get a chance to get married, have children, or enjoy having a family, right?"

"Yeah, I guess...but you don't necessarily have to have a family to live life to the fullest. I mean, some people prefer to stay single, which will be my option if I don't find a girlfriend soon enough," Sahan answered, jokingly.

"Haha...yes, you should go out and meet girls," Anthony replied, a smile on his face.

After a moment of silence, Anthony spoke up again,

"Sahan, I have to tell you something. It's better you know this sooner than later," he said, a bit hesitantly.

"What is it?" Sahan asked.

“Well...I have cancer,” replied Anthony, looking directly at him.

Once again, Sahan found himself without a proper answer. At first, he thought that Anthony was pulling some kind of prank. But knowing Anthony well enough, Sahan knew that he wouldn't joke about such matters.

“Many people have cancer nowadays...I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. How do you know you have cancer anyways?”

“Well, I started getting severe headaches, vomiting, and also seizures occasionally, some years ago. I had frequent headaches, and they were getting more and more painful each time. At first, I didn't care, since everyone gets headaches now and then. When it became unbearable, I went with my brother to see a doctor”

“The doctor had a suspicion and directed me to the cancer hospital. They ran a few tests and scans, checked how my senses were doing, and that kind of stuff... then they told me I have brain cancer. It's something called glioblastoma”

“They told me that this was an aggressive type of cancer...and the possibility to surgically remove the tumor had already gone since it had spread too much, you know?

For all this time, Sahan was silent. He could not believe what Anthony was telling him. Deep down he wished desperately that this was a prank, even though he knew Anthony was telling the truth.

“They gave me around a year, to live... that's why I urged you to come on that trip with me.”

“A year? To live...?” Sahan asked, shocked.

“Could be less than that, anytime now,” Anthony said with a smile.

“Can't this be cured, I mean we can't be too late?” asked Sahan.

“Well, I don’t think so...my time has come and I should face reality,” Anthony said. No matter how hard he tried to hide his sadness, Sahan could see his eyes tell the truth.

“Aren’t you getting any treatment now? Stay positive and fight it, damn it,” Sahan demanded. His despair had turned to anger.

“Sahan, I don’t want you to be worried. That’s why I didn’t want to tell you this sooner,” Anthony said.

Sahan could not believe what was happening. He was slowly training his mind to see the good in the worst of circumstances, but this?

Sahan expected Anthony to be worried; after all, he was the one who was going to die. But Anthon’s calmness made Sahan uneasy, it made him think Anthony had entirely given up on his hope to live.

“My father knows a few people in influential positions. Let me ask him to see whether we can get the best damn doctors in the country,” said Sahan.

Anthony laughed for a while. “Sahan, it’s not like everyone can treat cancer. Cancer has many types too. Plus you have to realize everyone is helpless in the face of these things. Even the most powerful ones”.

“What I want you to do right now, the best thing you can do for me is to stay calm. Accept reality, we are not here to stay forever,” said Anthony.

It was amazing how, even when facing death, Anthony tried to soothe Sahan. After all, it should be him who should be worried, sad, and depressed. Instead, he was comforting his best friend.

“Plus, this is a good thing you know, a blessing only a few people get,” said Anthony.

“A blessing? How can this be a damn blessing? Sahan asked, bursting with anger. *“It’s one thing to be calm about this, but it’s another thing to think of this as a blessing,”* he thought to himself.

“Come sit with me Sahan. Let me explain.”

“Many people don’t know when they will die. One moment, they’re okay, but the next moment, they’re gone... right?”

“They don’t get the chance to say goodbye to their loved ones, they don’t get the chance to forgive others and make amends for their own mistakes. Some die with regret, some die with sadness, and many do not have time to make peace with death.”

“Fortunately my friend, I know when I will die. I know at least how much time is left for me. I can use this time to make peace with myself, to do what I wanted to do, and live my life to the fullest... let me tell you, my friend, when you get closer to death, you feel a sense of freedom. I realized there is no point in worrying over petty issues because they wouldn’t matter. All my anxieties and insecurities are gone now. I’m happy more than ever I guess.”

“I wanted to travel around, see the beautiful things in the world, or at least see the beauty in my own country...before I go. You see, if I hadn’t known that I might be dead soon, I wouldn’t have gone on that trip in the first place. Because like all of us, I may have ended up postponing the things which really mattered, giving various excuses. Then at my dying moments, I might have regretted the way I chose to lead my life. So this is why, my dear friend, knowing that you will die soon, is a blessing,” Anthony said, looking at Sahan with a sincere smile.

After a while Anthony said, “Sahan, I want you to live your life like that. Always think that you’ll die soon, maybe tomorrow, maybe after one week... think about your death. Think about what matters to you... and do what makes you happy”

“When you find yourself getting worried, angry, frustrated, or anxious over little things, always think, ‘If I am to die tomorrow, would these things matter?’ You’ll see that you were suffering for nothing.”

“You just need someone who truly gets you, someone who is ready to accept you for whoever you’re. Someone ready to listen to you, who is ready to stay beside you... that’s the most precious thing you can have in your life. Fortunately, buddy, I was blessed. I was alone before I met you, but your company made me happy, took away my loneliness, and made my life beautiful. Thank you for your true friendship,” Anthony said, punching Sahan’s shoulder playfully.

Sahan didn’t say anything...he was looking at the horizon far away. Maybe he was too overwhelmed by the sadness. Sometimes, the sadness of reality is unbearable.

After a while, Sahan spoke, his voice breaking,

“I was fed up with this life. I even tried to kill myself. I didn’t have any real friends. But you made me realize that life was worth living. You taught me that life is something you should spend doing the things you want to do... In a sense, I guess you brought me into the light.”

Anthony looked at Sahan, tears filling his eyes.

The two friends sat there for a long time, in total silence.

After that day, Sahan made sure to visit Anthony’s place almost every day. Anthony’s brother, Sebastian, stayed at home to look after Anthony. Sahan could see Anthony was getting weaker day by day...and that he was slowly losing his mind, because of the disease.

One day, when Sahan was at the university, Sebastian called to let him know that Anthony had been hospitalized.

Sahan rushed to the hospital to see Anthony lying on a hospital bed, several tubes connected to his body. He was sleeping peacefully, at least that is what Sahan thought.

Sebastian was beside Anthony, holding his hand. “He’s already lost consciousness,” said Sebastian, tears falling from his eyes.

Anthony’s brain had already given up. Sahan knew what would happen next.

Anthony breathed his last...in the presence of his brother and his best friend.

At Anthony’s funeral, Sebastian came towards Sahan and handed him a note.

“Anthony wrote us letters before losing consciousness,” he said.

“I found this on his table yesterday,” he handed over the note which had the name ‘Sahan’ written on the cover.

Dear Sahan,

I’m writing this note, because even facing death, I can’t find the courage to tell you what I want... I know that I’ve been annoying you with my philosophical ideas. The truth was I needed someone to talk and share them with. Even though they were bothersome, you listened to them patiently, showing genuine interest in what I was saying.

Before I met you, all I had was my brother. He did everything, sacrificing his happiness to offer me the life I wanted. I was lonely inside, which made me awkward in normal conversation. After I met you, I found my loneliness had gone away. I had a best friend to share laughter, happiness, and joy.

I enjoyed the time I spent with you. I enjoyed every moment of it. I’m sorry if I wasn’t the friend you deserved. You’re with me in my most difficult moments...thank you so much for that. I hope you will find the happiness you deserve.

Do you believe in fate? I believe we meet certain people because we're destined to meet them.

Maybe we were destined to be friends, to help each other out.

Remember, my friend, treasure the memories. Memories will be created whenever you enjoy this life. That is all you will be left with, in the end.

Follow your purpose. Do what you're supposed to do in this lifetime. Help others, and by doing so, help yourself.

Take a deep breath...walk under the trees...enjoy their shade...run like you never did before...laugh like it is the last time you will...get drenched in the rain...sing, dance, be happy...and more than anything, treat yourself with kindness.

Who knows? Maybe this is not the end. Maybe we will meet again...

Anthony

EPILOGUE

A year has passed since Anthony's death. I just came home after visiting Sebastian's bookstore. Yes, that's right, Sebastian and his girlfriend are running a bookstore together now. Publishing Anthony's poems and short stories have made them enough money to open a bookstore. This is what Anthony would have wanted.

What wouldn't I give to see Anthony's smile, one more time...unfortunately, you and I both know that's not possible.

In times of confusion, when I feel sadness taking over me, when I give in to worry and anger, I can hear his voice, guiding me, telling me to stay strong. It's like he's living in my mind...

Doro lives with me now. I asked for Doro from Sebastian because he reminds me of Anthony. Just like we rescued Doro, Anthony saved my life.

Maybe there is a heaven after death, maybe not, who am I to say.

But I think, instead of searching for heavens beyond this world, we must look for the heaven which is always with us.

I wish you all the happiness in the world!!

THE END